

Sustainability as a shared value: universities and the pandemic

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In times of crisis our values are tested. Coronavirus is impacting societies, institutions, families and individuals in all the ways that challenge us most. It finds the cracks in our systems of governance, businesses and personal lives, exposes inequalities and magnifies them. Whether it is the precarious economic situation of a country or a household, our health or relationships, the virus is testing our resilience at multiple levels of human existence.



Governments around the world have responded by seizing power to [curtail basic liberties](#) with very little public resistance, in ways that would have seemed unimaginable a few months ago. At the same time they are also rolling out [billion-dollar schemes](#) to save lives and prevent global economic and societal collapse. That these measures are considered necessary and urgent demonstrates how unsustainable human existence has become and that the values of global capitalism and relationships between people and planet have been found wanting.

On a societal level, when human lives were suddenly changed, individualism manifested itself through panic-buying on a grand scale. But this [fear-based response](#) was soon overtaken by a reawakened sense of community and awareness of the things that matter most – our health and relationships with each other and the natural world.

When ([or if](#)) our freedoms are eventually regained, in a best-case scenario, we will take the opportunity to become a more resilient, caring and cooperative species, living simpler, healthier and more connected lives. The planet will continue to benefit from the [drop in pollution levels](#). Our new forms of work and social life will lead us to create more sustainable working practices and family lives for the future.

What could this mean for universities? Shortly before Coronavirus made its impact in the UK, the University of Sussex held its first [Sustainability Assembly](#) to discuss how we should respond to the climate emergency. In this short space of time, Coronavirus has already magnified the cracks and inequities in the values and structures of academic institutions.

As businesses and livelihoods are hit across the country, the vulnerability of those on precarious employment contracts has been thrown into sharp relief as universities look to make savings in their [response to the crisis](#). Could this be the moment where secure employment and a fairer income differential between the highest and lowest paid becomes an ethical imperative? As [academic publishers](#) open their paywalls to give free access to scientific research during the pandemic, will we see an acceleration towards open access to knowledge and greater scientific collaboration globally? As travel bans caused [academic conferences](#) around the world to be cancelled, will international conferences transform into more affordable and environmentally sustainable on-line meeting places, enabling participation of a global and diverse community of scholars? As lecturers and students grapple with new virtual ways of teaching and learning, will this be the beginning of the [virtual university](#) or a rediscovery of the value of face to face seminars and lectures? Will working from home practices be encouraged as an effective way to reduce pollution? Through all this, how will the academic world address the '[digital divide](#)' between those who have access to technology and those who do not?

In order to answer these questions, we must turn to our values. At a global level, the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) set out a universal call to action for people and planet. Sustainability concerns our ability to manage and use the earth's resources equitably for present and future generations. This recognises the interdependence of a healthy planet and human health and wellbeing. As we begin to adapt to new socially distanced and virtual ways of life, we are simultaneously confronting the challenges of an unsustainable human existence and rediscovering our values of health and relationships with each other and the planet.

A recently published [Health Equity in England report](#) found evidence from around the world that social and economic progress depends on flourishing human health. Human health depends on planetary health. If health stops improving, society stops improving. For universities in the grip of a [mental health crisis](#), this is an important insight. In 2019 the New Zealand Parliament passed the world's first '[wellbeing budget](#)' designed and based on wellbeing priorities for sustainable growth. This moves away from measuring wealth in terms of productivity, to investing in areas that are essential for wellbeing, including our health, education, housing, relationships, personal finances and the environment.

At a time when human health and values are being tested and transformed by the effects of Coronavirus, there is an opportunity for universities to reflect on their values and transform for the better. Just as wider social and economic progress depends on human health, the progress of universities depends on the flourishing of its students and staff as one interconnected whole. The values and structures of a sustainable university and global academic culture must therefore be rooted in health and wellbeing, a commitment to intergenerational equity and sustainable relationships between people and the planet.

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